

## **“Hope for the Earth”**

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Even as a young child, I understood that Easter was the most important day in the Christian calendar. The music was bigger, the clothes fancier, the crowds larger. Decades later, I still cannot shake the sense that Easter matters more than most any other day. Each year, I sign up for the Easter flowers as a small way to express the extravagance I associate with the holiday. Even as a humanist-leaning UU, Easter remains a deeply meaningful celebration of hope.

And we need hope. We need hope when we're worried about a health scare faced by a loved one or by ourselves. We need hope when values and rights we hold dear are eroding in state governments across the nation. And we need hope as the climate of the entire planet changes to threaten life as we know it.

But we need more than the kind of hope that washes away as quickly as a sandcastle in an ocean tide. We need more than wishful thinking that somehow someone will just make it turn out all right.

In their book *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're In with Unexpected Resilience and Creative Power*, authors Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone begin by acknowledging that “hope is often thought of as a feeling things are going to get better.” (2) But such hope is harder and harder to come by in the face of the climate crises. Will the resources of food, water, and clean air remain available to us? Will our civilization even endure?! Faced with such bleakness, maintaining a cheery sense of hopefulness that “it will all just work out” feels like far too little. However, Macy and Johnstone suggest another understanding of hope.

This second kind of hope begins by connecting with what we *desire* for the world. What do you hope for the future of the world? For the earth that the next generation and the next will inhabit? Knowing what we hope for starts a journey. What we *do* next with that hope makes all the difference. Macy and Johnstone write:

“Passive hope is about waiting for external agencies to bring about what we desire. Active Hope is about becoming active participants in the process of moving towards our hopes and, where we can, realizing them. Active Hope is a practice. Like tai chi or gardening, it is something we *do* rather than something we *have*.” (4)

I can almost hear the internal groans from you—please don't ask us to *do* more. . . specially to tackle *climate change* for goodness sake! While I say this in a somewhat jokey tone, there is a real despair within us, isn't there? The problems around us can feel so intractable—not just climate change, but also the political divisiveness, the erosion of human rights and democracy, as well as the safety of our kids from gun violence, from transphobic laws, and, yes, from a planet facing dire predictions.

When I was a kid, basically none of these problems were on my radar. A child of the 70's, I was too young to understand the corruption of Watergate, although I do have vague memories of long lines for gas. What I do remember is the feeling that I had at church when we learned about the evil of sin and the despair of being cast away as a sinner. At the time, the reality of heaven and hell as places where one would spend eternity felt as true to me as any other "fact" I was learning at school. In a way, I have spent a lifetime seeking an adequate response to that existential dread about the future and what role my own choices play in determining that future.

At its core, I believe Easter is a response to the existential dread of hopelessness found in human living. Admittedly, various Christians believe differently about why Easter matters. For some Easter is about the fulfillment of religious law that requires a worthy sacrifice to balance the sins of the world. In this understanding, Jesus' death washes away the sins of those who believe in him—or, as Universalists believe—off *all* of us. For others, the key promise of Easter is the resurrection of the dead and the hope that death is not the final word. And for still others, including many Christian Unitarian Universalists, Easter is the conviction that the life and teachings of Jesus the prophet were not in vain but live on in his disciples...to this day.

At different stages of my life, each of these theologies have been meaningful to me. My spiritual life has been a meandering journey, perhaps like yours. Today that journey leads me to encounter Easter through the lens of the climate crises. I feel in my fear for the earth an echo of that soul deep dread I experienced as a kid afraid of hell.

Does Easter have a hope for that?

As a spring holiday, Easter does speak to the hope of new life. As our Time for All Ages story on seeds depicted, there is real wonder in the emergence of life each spring. And yet, even this is under threat by climate change as topsoil washes away, too much or too little rain falls, or average temperature shift altering the viability of certain crops in a region.

Yes, this *is* depressing. And yet, as Macy and Johnstone urge, naming the pain we feel is important and even freeing. Such awareness opens us up not only to the despair we feel, but also to the enormous love and gratitude we hold for our beloved earth. This love and gratitude can fuel our resilience to face the challenges. What do you *hope* for the future? Dare you to dream? To name it? To feel it?

Active Hope asks of us to open ourselves to our desires for the future—even if they emerge within a tangle of negative emotions of fear. Feeling connected to what we value, to what really matters to us, opens up resources of resiliency to live for what we love. Active Hope begins with a sense of gratitude for what we love, then names the pain in our awareness, and finally turns to living out the hopes we desire . . . even if we never see the outcome.

Of course, we do hope for certain outcomes. And yet, failing to achieve what we hope for in our lifetime does not mean we should not actively live towards these hopes. There are many circumstances where people fought to disrupt “business as usual” systems that seemed too massive to ever change—systems like slavery or denying women the right to vote or ending apartheid in South Africa. There are repeated examples in history of a “crazy” idea becoming a real threat to the status quo and then simply becoming “normal.” Macy and Johnstone write, “If it is a struggle for you to believe that what you hope for is possible, know that others have felt this way too.” (185) Continuing, they add that failure along the way need not be the end. Rather, they suggest:

“Failure and frustration may well be necessary parts of the journey, because if we stick only to what we know how to do and feel confident about, we limit ourselves to the old, familiar ways rather than developing new capacities. . . . The good news about frustration and failure is that they show that we have dared to step outside our comfort zones and rise to a challenge that stretches us. Let’s reframe frustration and failure in a way that encourages us to persist rather than give up.” (186)

What if we reframe the “good news” of Easter not as a passive hope of being rescued by an external deity? What if we reframe the joy of Easter as an active hope that risks frustration and failure to work for a world in which Life continues to flourish? What if Easter could be the day that we celebrate our love for the earth, for Life itself, and recommit to our hope for a more sustainable future for all?

Today, we are still in need of a hope that emerges from a place of joy. Perhaps today our dread comes more from the climate crises, gun violence, or eroding democracy than from fear for our eternal soul. We still need a hope that enables us to persist with our living and our loving, our caring and our trying to make a better world.

Active hope is also relevant for First Parish as a congregation in this time of ministerial transition. I acknowledge that your emotions may be complex—mine certainly are. Active hope asks each of you to consider your desires for the future of this community—and to collaborate with others through the interim and search process to move towards those hopes. I've been thinking a lot about how my role as a minister is akin to that of a midwife—I do not *create* the life that flows within the bonds and activities of this congregation; I simply help it to come into being. That is what ministers are trained to do and it has been my joy to do this work with you...and to do so in our remaining time together. My active hope is that you will find in new ministerial leadership continued collaboration in cultivating the abundant life and love within this congregation.

Easter is a celebration of hope. Hope does not have to be a passive feeling of cheery hopefulness. Hope can be something we do to bring about the world we desire. Yes, we face uncertainty as a congregation, a nation, and a planet. To this Macy and Johnstone write,

In this time of uncertainty, our choices and actions play a role in shaping what happens next. ... If we hold in mind the best that can happen as well as the worst, what can we do to make better scenarios more likely and worse ones less so? The process of turning up to play our part, turning toward our hopes, and turning away from behaviors that make our fears more likely is something we can do from any starting point. ... [As] Greta Thunberg said, 'It's never too late to do as much as we can.'" (228)

May this Easter day remind us of our hopes and inspire us to do what we can to make a better world together.

Amen and Hallelujah!